

# **A Grander Story**

*An Invitation to Christian Professors*

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# Contents

Foreword . . . . .	.xi
<i>Dr. Jeff Hardin, Zoology, University of Wisconsin–Madison</i>	
Preface: A Grand Invitation. . . . .	xv
<i>Introduction. . . . .</i>	<i>1</i>
<b>PART 1: A GRANDER STORY</b>	
<i>Chapter 1</i> The Story . . . . .	7
<i>Chapter 2</i> The Grandest One . . . . .	19
<i>Chapter 3</i> Grander Being . . . . .	31
<i>Chapter 4</i> Grander Doing. . . . .	43
<b>PART 2: GRANDER LIVES</b>	
<i>Chapter 5</i> The Academy and Jesus. . . . .	73
<i>Dr. Ken Elzinga, Economics, University of Virginia</i>	
<i>Chapter 6</i> Holding the Staff . . . . .	87
<i>Dr. Susan Siaw, Psychology, California State Polytechnic University, Pomona</i>	
<i>Chapter 7</i> The “Progress” of a Faculty “Pilgrim” . . . . .	99
<i>Dr. Walter Bradley, Mechanical Engineering, Colorado School of Mines, Texas A&amp;M, Baylor University</i>	
<i>Chapter 8</i> I Never Saw That Coming . . . . .	119
<i>Dr. Phil Bishop, Exercise Physiology, University of Alabama</i>	
<i>Chapter 9</i> An Enduring Legacy. . . . .	131
<i>Dr. John Walkup, Electrical Engineering, Texas Tech</i>	

*Chapter 10* Go Early ..... 145  
*Dr. Heather Holleman, English, Pennsylvania State University*

**PART 3: TOWARD A GRANDER FUTURE**

*Chapter 11* Best Practices ..... 159

*Chapter 12* Grander Longing ..... 177

Appendix A: Common Legal Questions: Q&A ..... 197

Appendix B: A Brief Overview of Legal Principles ..... 207

Appendix C: The Mission, Vision, and Distinctives of  
Faculty Commons. .... 213

# Foreword

*Dr. Jeff Hardin | Zoology*

I had always felt life first as a story: and if there is a story there is a story-teller.

—G. K. Chesterton, *Orthodoxy*

**S**tories are powerful. Whether they are the stuff of fiction or a well-crafted biography, a well-told story draws us into its world, inviting us to inhabit its space, to feel its rhythms, to be shaped by its imaginative vision. Good stories have absorbing plot lines and captivating imagery. In a good story, the characters are integral, not incidental, to the story. They have integrity as they undergo development fitting to the story and a three-dimensionality that contrasts with the flat characters of less compelling writing.

Most of us love a good story. But I wonder how many of us who are Christian academics have the sense G. K. Chesterton did of being integral characters in the greatest story of all: the amazing story of the victory of God's redemptive love expressed supremely in Jesus Christ. Amid the incessant pressure of grant deadlines, grading, preparing new lectures, or tweaking our CVs, it is easy for us to lose sight of the unique roles we can play as Christian faculty as we are conformed to the image of the Grand One who entered His own literary masterpiece to become its central protagonist.

What story does your life tell? As hard as it is for me to believe, I have been a faculty member in the Department of Zoology at the University of Wisconsin for twenty-five years. These years have been filled with the thrill of discovery, the joy of teaching many generations of students, and with opportunities for ministry. It has been a wonderful, blessed life and an exciting story of God's faithfulness. One of the key threads of that story stirred in me before I'd met my wife, Susie, or felt a call to the academic life, when I was in

seminary. I'm not certain exactly how, but in those days, I became convinced that my life should be about more than maximizing my professional competence. Perhaps it was the visit of Harry Blamires, author of the classic book *The Christian Mind*, to our campus, or perhaps it was the challenge of reading *A Christian Critique of the University* by Lebanese Christian and scholar Charles Habib Malik.<sup>1</sup> Whatever the ingredients, I developed a strong desire for a life aimed at something that transcended personal accomplishment, that reflected Jesus's call to all Christians in the Sermon on the Mount:

You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven. (Matt. 5:13–16, NRSV)

Believing in that call is one thing; living it out is another! As isolated grains of salt in the midst of the mundane, day-to-day aspects of university life, we are in danger of losing our flavor, of hiding our lamps. The book you are about to read is a resource I wish I'd had twenty-five years ago. I believe *A Grander Story* is going to be an invaluable aid to fellow grains of salt like me as we seek to fulfill God's call to be part of His grander story in the world.

Why is it so hard for us to stay salty? One reason is, to borrow a phrase from *New York Times* blogger Tim Kreider,<sup>2</sup> the *deformative effects of our environment*. At secular universities, there is tremendous pressure to “let the world around [us] squeeze [us] into its own mold,” as J. B. Phillips so memorably paraphrased Romans 12:2a, rather than being “transformed by the renewing of our minds” (Rom. 12:2b, NRSV). What makes the situation especially challenging is that we often fail to realize that we are gradually being leached of our saltiness. To extend Jesus's second metaphor from Matthew 5:13–16 in the modern era, it becomes all too easy for us to “switch off” our Christian faith when we set foot on the campus, so that we are indistinguishable from our colleagues, only to try to “switch on” our Christian commitments when we leave the campus.

A second reason that it is hard for us to stay salty is that we *lack examples to emulate*. Many of us may be the only Christian faculty member in our

department that we know of, so finding local, like-minded people and creative examples of Christian faithfulness can be difficult. If our environment is actively shaping us in deformative ways, then this lack of positive examples exacerbates the situation. Because we lack local, embodied reminders of a different, profoundly Christian way of living as faculty day-to-day, we all too often fail to realize that salty alternatives exist and that we are drifting into unsaltiness.<sup>3</sup>

*A Grander Story* tackles these two issues head on. Written in a unique back-and-forth narrative style by two dynamic Faculty Commons staff members, Rick Hove and Heather Holleman, it is a book I wish I'd had as a fledgling professor. It inspires. It presents a vision of faculty life so captivating that it will encourage you to be the salt and light that Jesus envisioned, even when there are implicit and explicit pressures within academe not to do so.

This book will draw you in in two key ways. First, as the title suggests, *A Grander Story* provides a *grander vision* for Christian faculty in the thick of their daily lives by succinctly describing the grander story of the gospel and why it should be the central organizing principle in everything we do as Christian faculty. What makes the book's first section (chapters 1–4) a compelling read is that it reaches not just the head but also the heart by weaving personal stories and biblical foundations together. Heather's own story and the heart that lies behind it are especially gripping in this section.

The second section of the book provides six stories of actual faculty members and how they seek to live out their callings to be flavorful grains of salt where they are. Each story has an integrity and depth that reflects a life committed to Christlike obedience. Each of the stories is different; there is no one-size-fits-all approach here. Through telling their very different stories, we are allowed to peek over the shoulders of men and women who—at different stages in their careers—became convinced that they should orient their lives as Christian faculty around a grander story. Their narratives are both personal and practical. Perhaps just as important, these faculty members share tales of setbacks and lessons learned over years of lived experience.

The last section of the book provides some suggestions for putting ideas into practice from the previous chapters of the book. This section is refreshing, because it resists being overly prescriptive; it provides many helpful suggestions that can be tried on for size by faculty in different settings. I know I will be going into the “ministry fitting room” this semester armed with new, creative ideas.

At the end of *A Grander Story*, I found myself asking a penetrating question: in what ways am I as a Christian faculty member moving the story of Jesus Christ, the grand storyteller, forward? I was inspired and challenged. I pray that you are as well.

—Dr. Jeff Hardin, Chair of Zoology,  
University of Wisconsin–Madison

## Notes

1. The versions I read are Harry Blamires, *The Christian Mind: How Should a Christian Think?*, 1st ed. (Ann Arbor, MI: Servant Publishers, 1980); and Charles H. Malik, *A Christian Critique of the University* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1982).
2. Tim Kreider, “The ‘Busy’ Trap,” *Opinionator* (blog), *New York Times*, June 30, 2012 <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/06/30/the-busy-trap>.
3. I have been incredibly blessed to have some wonderful local examples of commitment to Christ at Wisconsin. Some of these examples can be found at <http://uwchristianfaculty.org/tradition/tradition.html>. Before I even thought of a career as a professor, while I was still in seminary, I encountered some of these while browsing at a local Christian bookstore. Little did I know at the time that some of these godly people would become my colleagues! See Peter Wilkes, ed., *Christianity Challenges the University* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981). Made available for download with permission at <http://uwchristianfaculty.org/tradition/challenge/challenge.html>.

# Preface

## A Grand Invitation

This book invites Christian faculty to live wholeheartedly for God’s grander story, centered on His Son, Jesus. Whether serving at institutions public or private, research or teaching, two-year or four-year—as tenure-line professors, adjuncts, lecturers, or visiting scholars—our hope is that God will use this book to encourage each professor<sup>1</sup> in his or her calling and help usher in the day when movements of Christ-following professors on every campus will be used by God to bless those around them and around the world.

Being a Christian professor is hardly for the faint of heart. Nevertheless, the academic life offers one of the most strategic places—and perhaps the best place—to impact the world. No wonder so many professors cherish their particular calling to the academy.

This book offers three sections: Part 1 (chapters 1–4) invites Christian professors to join in “a grander story,” one that transcends the academy (chapter 1). This story features Jesus Christ as its beginning, end, and stunning focal point (chapter 2). If Jesus is so great, then it follows that it is He who shapes our lives and calling: How does His greatness shape our identity as Christian academics, our *being* (chapter 3)? And correspondingly, how does Christ’s greatness shape our academic *doing*, our practice (chapter 4)?

Part 2 (chapters 5–10) recounts the stories of six different Christian professors who have lived their academic careers in light of this grander story. Each personal narrative details the triumphs and defeats of those who have attempted to honor Christ in their disciplines, at their universities, over decades. You’ll meet Dr. Walter Bradley (chapter 7), whose story “is one of struggle and blessing for more than forty years in the academy,” and Dr. Ken Elzinga (chapter 5), whose faith uniquely shaped his approach to teaching more than forty-five thousand students at the University of Virginia. You’ll read of psychology professor Dr. Susan Siaw (chapter 6), who,



as the first in her immediate family to go to college, now integrates her faith with her discipline of psychology, serving many students and colleagues. Dr. Phil Bishop (chapter 8) traverses the globe while loving locally, Dr. John Walkup (chapter 9) offers an emeritus professor's reflections on a legacy of learning to trust God, and Dr. Heather Holleman (chapter 10) shares her enthusiastic love for vivid verbs while embracing the people of the university. These life stories can encourage and instruct every Christian professor. They are the heart of this book.

Part 3 (chapters 11–12) introduces a grander future with best practices and a vision for the grand story. If God were to raise up movements of Christian professors at every university, full of men and women like those found in chapters 5–10, how might He bless and change the world through these uniquely gifted men and women? What would it be like to be part of a grander story in academia that left a meaningful imprint on the world?

The appendices provide a resource on legal considerations as well as a concise summary of the mission, vision, and distinctive values of Faculty Commons.

This book is not written as a “how to grow in your faith” book, though we certainly hope it proves helpful toward that end. Nor is it primarily a “how to integrate your faith into your discipline” book, though we think it will encourage this too. And though we've offered many resources in this area, it isn't offered as a professor's ministry handbook. Rather, the book aims to anchor the call of a Christian to the professoriate in God's grander story, inviting each professor to find a new identity, mission, and hope in light of God's grander story.

## How Might You Use This Book?

Each chapter concludes with discussion questions you might use individually or, ideally, with a group of Christian faculty, perhaps alongside Faculty Commons staff. Envision a lively group of your peers pondering each chapter together over morning coffee, a lunch on campus, or even over dessert once a week. Imagine attempting its suggestions on campus, reporting back to your group, and pressing on with encouragement, prayer, and fellowship. Finally, think about how refreshing such a group could be to your soul as you position yourself before Jesus to see how He might use the chapters and your peers to grow your soul. A pervasive theme that emerges throughout the stories in the book is the pressing need for Christian colleagues, for those to journey with us. We so hope this book spawns conversation that serves to bring Christian

academics together, whether informally over coffee, in a local congregation, or on campus in a local faculty movement.

## Who Should Read This Book?

This book is written for those who desire to follow Christ in the academy. If this is not you, we still invite you to read it. Perhaps it might prove helpful to better understand your colleagues who are Christians, and hopefully you will be enriched by it. Throughout the book, we've tried to affirm a Christian perspective while at the same time viewing with great respect and dignity those who just as wholeheartedly believe in other positions. We have much to learn from them; the university is richer and better because of dialogue between competing perspectives, and we treasure being colleagues with those who espouse divergent viewpoints.

## Who Authored This Book?

This book is produced by Faculty Commons,<sup>2</sup> a division of the Campus Ministry of Cru,<sup>3</sup> an international Christian group founded as Campus Crusade for Christ in 1951. Faculty Commons serves professors and graduate students across the country. Begun as Christian Leadership Ministries in 1980, more than two thousand professors are currently involved with Faculty Commons on more than two hundred campuses across the country. Throughout the book, you'll find links to various resources produced by Faculty Commons that will help you in your calling as a Christian professor.

Two Faculty Commons staff members wrote this book together and compiled the six faculty stories. Rick Hove has served as a Cru staff member since 1979 and as the executive director of Faculty Commons since 2005. He studied civil engineering at Georgia Tech, graduating with highest honors, and earned his master's of divinity at Trinity International University (*summa cum laude*). He and his wife, Sonya, live between Duke University and the University of North Carolina in Durham, North Carolina. Heather Holleman is likewise on the staff of Faculty Commons. She completed her undergrad work at the University of Virginia, graduating with highest distinction and earning the Wagenheim Prize for the best essay written by an undergraduate for her work on Emily Dickinson. She earned her PhD at the University of Michigan (2002), studying shame and guilt in nineteenth-century British poetry, and currently serves as a faculty lecturer in the English Department of Penn

State, teaching freshmen composition and serving as the program director for Advanced Writing in the Humanities. She publishes books in the Christian living genre for women and regularly speaks at Christian conferences. Heather also works alongside her husband, Ashley Holleman, who directs the national graduate student ministry of Cru. Both love the opportunity to serve Christian professors and grad students whenever possible. Most chapters contain a bit of both voices; this should be easy to delineate. The book is a collaborative effort, reflecting voices and experiences from decades of ministry alongside professors.

## Thank You

Many, many professors and Faculty Commons staff have offered their input on this work. We are much beholden to their input, and the book is so much better because of it. All mistakes, of course, remain ours. We are especially indebted to one insightful work: pastor, distinguished professor, and former university president Duane Litfin's *Conceiving the Christian College*.<sup>4</sup> In light of the title, most professors at secular universities might not be familiar with his work, yet Litfin has worked hard to articulate what it means to think "Christianly." We freely acknowledge the ways in which we've learned from him and highly commend his book to you.

Our hearts are full of gratitude to so many who pioneered before us. In the Cru (formerly Campus Crusade for Christ) world, the grandfather of faculty ministry is Walter Bradley. You'll read of his story in chapter 7. Since the late 1960s, he has been leading us in this area. Early pioneers like Rae Mellichamp soon joined him. We owe them an immense debt of gratitude. In 1980, Stan Oakes founded Christian Leadership Ministries, a new ministry of Cru and the forerunner of Faculty Commons. Probably more than two hundred Cru staff, over almost four decades, have given their hearts, minds, and lives to the cause of encouraging and equipping thousands of Christian professors. We stand on all their shoulders, with humble gratitude.

We especially wish to thank the six professors who shared their life stories with us in chapters 5–10. Their lives and journeys provide the true heart of the book. These men and women have "fought the good fight" through countless challenging moments, and the lessons they have learned along the way not only encourage our hearts but shine a light on our paths. As you might imagine, it is unnerving in many ways to share "your story" with other academics. Aspiring Christian academics and Christ-following professors across

the world will find encouragement and hope through your stories. You have given us a great gift. We hope this book will be a catalyst for thousands and thousands of stories like yours to bless the world.

Groups like Faculty Commons exist solely through the generous financial support of so many. We owe each such a deep debt of gratitude. In most cases, these investments have planted seeds and borne fruit in people and places far removed, yet these investments have been in the grandest of stories and in the most strategic of places, the great universities of our country and the world. We are reminded of Jesus's parable in Luke 16, where we are encouraged to invest financial resources to raise up "friends" for the future. This generosity has produced *so many* "friends"—in students, grad students, and faculty across the world. We are deeply thankful for the support.

Most importantly, we hope this book makes much of Christ. John the Baptist summarizes this about his role: "He must increase, but I must decrease" (John 3:30). The great hope for the academy is not Faculty Commons, a political party, or a strategy; the great hope for the world is that there is a great Savior. The great hope for the academy is that there is a glorious, redeeming God, and the academy is not it. Above all, we hope this book prompts one to run to the Grandest One, God's Son, Jesus.

## A Final Encouragement

This is a book that I (Heather) wish I'd had as a new PhD student at the University of Michigan and as a young faculty member. As I worked on compiling the contributing articles and collaborated with Rick on the chapters, I found myself overwhelmed with the greatness and goodness of Jesus. But I wasn't always this open to God's work in my heart, and I expect that is true of many who might read this book.

Early on in my graduate studies, the Cru staff at Michigan shared with me a scripture that deeply challenged me about my attitude as a scholar and teacher. In 1 Chronicles, we read David's words to his son, Solomon, which serve as a commissioning, as final words of wisdom and a model for how to live and work. Here David says, "And you, Solomon my son, know the God of your father and serve him with a whole heart and with a willing mind" (1 Chron. 28:9).

A willing mind? No. At the time, I had a skeptical, cynical one. Like most in the academy, I had been trained to rip research apart, to criticize and scrutinize every argument, and to embrace myself as the smartest one in the room. But would I allow myself to have a willing mind? A mind willing to be

corrected, seek the wisdom of others, and learn from God through those not trained as scholars? Could I? Of course I *could*. But *would* I?

Over time, with God's power, I grew to be someone who increasingly desires to be willing to search God's word with a heart inclined to follow. We pray this will become true in each of us, especially those who venture into this book.

## Notes

1. We use the term "professor" to broadly capture faculty of all levels.
2. <http://www.facultycommons.com>.
3. <http://www.cru.org>.
4. Duane Litfin, *Conceiving the Christian College* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2004).

# Introduction



Every September, just as the evenings cool to promise the crisp beauty of another Pennsylvania autumn, my husband and I (Heather) invite a new cohort of Christian graduate students at Penn State to our home for dinner. After dessert (homemade apple, cherry, peach, and blackberry pies from the local fruit farm—with fresh whipped cream), we send these students into small groups to answer this question: “Why are you here? What drew you to apply to graduate school to become a professor?”

Two decades earlier, I sat in another living room, balancing dessert on my lap, to answer the same question. This was 1998 at the University of Michigan, where winter arrived early, bringing icy snow and gloomy dark skies, and where I soldiered on through my second year of a PhD program in English literature. In this living room, I gathered with Christians who listened to former longtime Faculty Commons staff member Dr. Randy Newman read from Genesis 11 and the account of the Tower of Babel.

At the time, my own dreams for academic success held the central focus of my heart. I wanted to make a name for myself, to *be somebody* in the academic world. In this story, I would drive myself to greater and greater achievement, culminating in the PhD. Then, rejecting many enviable offers along the way, I would secure my choice tenure-track job, quickly earn tenure, and publish prolifically, resulting in widespread renown for being an outstanding scholar and educator.

This was the story I hoped my life would tell.

Why are you here?  
What drew you to apply  
to graduate school to  
become a professor?

I listened as Dr. Newman read aloud the words of the men building that tower, following along in my green study Bible: “Come, let us build ourselves a city and a tower with its top in the heavens, and let us make a name for ourselves” (Gen. 11:4). A name for yourself? I knew that desire well. Dr. Newman elucidated about what it meant to “make a name for yourself,” noting God’s response to this self-promotion. He then asked this group of PhD students about our own tendencies to “make a name for ourselves” instead of making God’s name great. Although there were nearly forty of us in that room, I felt Dr. Newman was sent by God to speak just to me.

Something shifted in my soul in that living room as I considered that question.

I scribbled in the margin of my Bible the astonishing and paradigm-shifting statement that I could live a life for another name. After all, it wasn’t my name that was great; it was His. I don’t remember this as a moment of condemnation or shame; rather, it felt as if I’d received an invitation to escape from the prison of myself and to harmonize my life to God.

I suspected that being enamored of a name other than my own would probably change much of my life. What would this mean for my teaching and research and how I interacted with my colleagues? What would that look like for me as a professor?

As the Michigan winter crept on, God continued to call out to me. I found myself in another living room, this time with Dr. Walter Bradley (you’ll read his inspiring story in chapter 7). He spoke to a group of graduate students about proclaiming the gospel on campus in ways that both motivated and challenged me. Here was a professor who told his students he followed Christ; he even hosted evangelistic events in his home with promises of pizza and engaging movies. I couldn’t imagine myself ever doing something like this. Why was Dr. Bradley so passionate about Jesus and interested in helping others know Him—not just on his campus but all over the world? How did the spheres of his professional life and his Christian life so naturally overlap? Dr. Bradley’s life showcased a radically different story than my experience so far (one that, at the time, mostly concerned itself with prancing around in my new teal suit at academic conferences, finding a boyfriend, clamoring for teaching awards, and drinking artisan coffee I couldn’t afford). He lived connected to a grander story.

Again, something shifted in my soul in that living room.

It took two living-room encounters, but that evening, my life goal of making a name for myself suddenly seemed not only small but foolish. I began

to see that it disconnected me from Jesus, and a wholehearted pursuit of me actually covertly opposed Him. I now found myself drawn to Isaiah, the prophet: “We wait for you; *your* name and renown are the desire of our hearts” (Isa. 26:8, NIV, emphasis mine). God had stirred my soul; now, in greater clarity than ever before, I knew that life was not about me and that He had created me for a grander story than myself.

Now, nearly twenty years later, I long for the times my husband and I fill *our* living room with pie-devouring graduate students, wrestling with the pressing question “Why am I here?” Oh, how we hope that God uses our living room as a step in their journeys to discover the refrain that God stirred in my heart twenty years ago, one that resounds in my soul with greater beauty today: God has made us for a name other than our own, and He has invited us to invest our lives in His grander story to bring hope to the world.

Will you consider this invitation to live in light of the grander story?

Will you consider  
this invitation to  
live in light of the  
grander story?



PART 1

A GRANDER STORY



# 1

## The Story



Last summer, a retired professor and I (Rick) floated down 187 miles of the Grand Canyon, from the Lee's Ferry launch to the Whitmore helipad, where a helicopter retrieved us from the bowels of the canyon. I will forever treasure this experience for a litany of reasons, but chief among them is the way those seven days, a mile deep in a canyon, altered my view of life.

Each evening, our group set up cots on the river's edge as eighteen thousand cubic feet of water a second roared by our heads. Eighteen thousand cubic feet of water *every second*. Imagine the roar of it and the reminder of such power. Each evening, not long into the darkness, moonlight suddenly dusted one rim's edge, more than a mile above our heads. Though the moon remained hidden from our vision, as it rose, its soothing light crept down into the canyon, illuminating the nuanced hues of the stratified canyon wall. Once the amber light touched the canyon bottom, it meandered across the shoreline, onto the river, revealing the surging Colorado River. Slowly the moon's beams danced their way across the river, ascending the opposing wall, showcasing yet more of God's breathtaking handiwork. When the moonlight finally evaporated off the second rim, a faint glow became discernable from somewhere up there, far outside the canyon. Though it would be some time before we welcomed the warming sun's beams to our cots, notice was delivered: a new day was ours.

As we sat in solitude on the edge of the river, more than a mile into the earth, with eighteen thousand cubic feet of water per second rushing by, nothing could be clearer than this: life is bigger than us. It is not because *we* are in the canyon that it is "grand." The canyon is grand whether we or anyone else

happens to be in it. In that canyon, each of us awoke to the wonderfully fresh realization that our lives are part of a much grander story. Something more beautiful, more powerful, and more compelling was transpiring, something we had little to do with. Yet still, we were there. Our lives intersect the grander story; they play a key role in the grander story; but they never supplant the grander story nor rival it as the ultimate narrative.

Metanarratives have fallen into disrepute within certain academic circles, but the God of the Bible claims to be the author of an ongoing metastory that can be succinctly summarized as creation, fall, redemption, and restoration.<sup>1</sup> Our lives are lived out in a world that is created and owned by God, in a world that has fallen, and yet in a world where God has made Himself known through the life, death, and resurrection of His Son. This is a world that retains remarkable evidence of God's creative image and one day will be fully restored. We are not given the specifics of the restoration we might clamor for, and one's theological persuasions will doubtless impact how one envisions the restoration taking place, yet undeniably God is in the business of redeeming a people for Himself and restoring His creation; He will assuredly complete the task for His glory.

## Our Role in the Story

A “grander story” perspective on life changes everything. One winter day in Chicago when I was in graduate school, I joined thousands of other scholars and pastors for a leadership conference held at one of the most influential churches in America. The facilities of this complex are impressive, more what one might expect at a new professional sports arena than a typical church. During a break, I entered the men's room, cavernous enough to pass as a short wing of a lesser building. I was surprised to be greeted by a gentleman, in a finely tailored suit, who was welcoming conventioners to this humble locale of a bathroom; this was a first for me. We introduced ourselves. A successful businessman in a Chicago suburb, he had taken the day off of work to *serve in the conference bathroom*: “I want to help advance the cause of Christ through serving you all at this conference.” I thanked him but marveled that this gentleman was so in tune with the grander story that he did not miss an opportunity to advance God's story to redeem and bless the world, even if it meant losing a day of vacation, by serving in a men's bathroom.

In the stories that form part 2 of this book, readers will often notice this “grander story” perspective. For example, at some point in many of these

journeys, a faculty member comes to affirm the difference between being a “professor who is a Christian” and a “Christian who is a professor.” This distinction is life-defining and flows from the reality that our career designations are not the ultimate referent in the world. Rather, this grander story is the ultimate metanarrative that shapes life; our lesser particular stories rightly find their place in relation to His grander story.

The majestic God of the universe brought you into the world, endowed you with certain gifts and abilities, and called you to play a pivotal role in one of the most strategic places in the world, the university. His grand story gives meaning to our particular stories, not vice versa, and His story provides the framework to tackle the questions: As a Christian professor, how shall I then live? How is my particular story as a Christian academic shaped by His grander story? What story will my life ultimately tell?

God’s grander story beckons as the ultimate referent for a life wisely lived. After all, His story precedes us (we had nothing to do with being born into this story), and our lives are but a subplot to His greater story (this story will continue far beyond us), and it is His ultimate story that provides meaning to all of life. How should we live as Christian academics? By recognizing the grander story and aligning our lives to its central character, themes, and purposes.

If the illustration of the vastness of the Grand Canyon, or any other splendid exhibit of the enormity of God, serves to convince us that life is not about us, an astute critic could proffer this as evidence that if such is the case, then our individual lives matter as little as a drop of water crashing through the canyon. If the ultimate story is God’s story, and if our stories find their significance in light of God’s story, would it not follow that any particular life story is insignificant? The scriptures resoundingly refute such thinking: God created each of us for the purpose of playing a unique role in His grand story. In Psalm 139:13–14, the author notes, “For you formed my inward parts; you knitted me together in my mother’s womb. I praise you, for I am fearfully and wonderfully made.” Each of us is handmade by God; this might be the most soul-encouraging verse in the Bible.

In Ephesians 2:10, the Apostle Paul expresses a similar thought: “For we are his workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them.” Every faculty member, whether a full professor or adjunct, at teaching colleges, R1 universities, or

local community colleges, has been created by God, gifted by God, and called by God to play a unique role in God's plan. These good works will include works with students and colleagues, works within a department and across disciplines, and works to bring hope to the world. It's a stirring thought to think God created you, gifted you, and called you to play a particular role in changing the world from your unique place in academe. You were created *for* this grander story.

Many Christian professors go to their particular jobs on campus each day constrained by the mind-set, "This is the best academic job I can find." Very few, from our experience, embrace their current position in this way: (1) God has created me for *this* job; (2) God has gifted me to do *this* work; (3) God has called me to *this* particular place, people, and academic work; and (4) God has gone ahead of me today to create particular good works for me to do, through which He can use me to help change the world.

When we combine the two truths that (1) our lives are part of God's grander story and (2) God has created and gifted *each of us* to be part of this thrilling plan, then our vocations find new meaning.

Every believer makes a specific contribution to the mission and work of God, but Christian professors are privileged to be at the heart of a truly strategic mission field: the university. One of the professors who shares his professional journey in a coming chapter frequently comments that he is absolutely certain that the university where he serves as a full professor is the most spiritually dark locale in his entire state: "If you could make an infographic to chart spiritual darkness, I'm certain our university would be in the center of the biggest black dot in the state." He is surely correct, which is why this university is such a great place to be! For decades this professor has made these great people and this fine institution to be his family and his home, seeking to bring love, hope, and light to the entire academic community around him. This university, as most, shapes the entire state, nation, and world.

If you think about it, so much of what we love and cherish is downstream of the American university:

- Every child and grandchild, for generations to come, even if they don't attend college, will be shaped by our universities' contributions to culture.
- The belief systems and values of our nation flow largely from our universities.
- Almost all our civic, judicial, and business leaders are shaped in our universities.

- The greatest challenges and crises facing our nation and the world are addressed through research in our universities.
- Scholars in our universities serve as primary arbiters of what is good and true for the rest of our society.
- Professors establish the culture or “climate” that encourages or prevents the gospel from taking root.

Other reasons could be offered as well. It is difficult to conceive of an institution with greater potential to shape (and bless!) the world than the university.

In Luke 6:40, Jesus remarked, “Everyone when he is fully trained will be like his *teacher*” (emphasis mine). Personally, we wouldn’t have concluded this; we would have suggested, “Everyone when he is fully trained will be like his *teaching*.” But according to Jesus, teachers indelibly shape students. There are two sides to this coin: If students become like their teachers, what are the ramifications of generation after generation of university students graduating without ever having met a single professor they knew to be a Christian? Conversely, what would be the impact if every university student in America had the opportunity, at least once, to study under a Christ-following professor? This reason alone, that our universities shape every future generation, is decisive evidence for the critical importance of the university as a mission field.

For a multitude of compelling reasons, the university is a strategic institution for the cause of the gospel as well as for the flourishing of our country and the world. Correspondingly, the Christian faculty member is positioned to play a critical role in God’s plan to redeem and bless the world by having a privileged seat in one of the most strategic mission fields in the world.

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## Life in Light of the Story

We live in the portion of God’s story that is after the “fall” and “redemption” and before the final “restoration.” Theologians refer to this as a period of “already/not yet” tension: We have a down payment of God’s presence in the Spirit, but we long to be with Him face-to-face; the power of sin has

been dealt with at the cross but not the presence of sin; we will live forever, but we physically die. Life often feels much more like pushing a rock uphill than water flowing downhill. In this era, our lives both inside and outside the university are a confused amalgamation of hope and heartbreak. We cling to, celebrate, and share our redemption in Christ while longing for a wholeness that is not yet ours.

While participating in a small group at Duke University, I asked the question, “If you could change one thing about your life, what would it be?” The group grew reflectively sober. At the time I offered the question, I honestly thought of it more as an “ice breaker” than a “share your soul” sort of question, but here are but a few of the comments that came forward:

“I wish my parents had stayed together.”

“I wish I had never gotten into pornography.”

“I wish I would have not done some things that I have done.”

Don’t ask this question to students or professors unless you expect to be sobered by the pain-filled answers.

One hardly needs to pause to tell the stories of personal brokenness within the academy. We tend to measure our worth by our performance and critique any and all who dare expose weaknesses inherent in it. We are prone to be enamored of ourselves, critical of others, and as happy as the good reviews of our latest journal article or teaching evaluation. A friend who led Cru’s former graduate student ministry actually created a grad crisis help line. No one familiar with academe would ever wonder, “Why would you need that?”

In pastor and author Paul David Tripp’s book *What Did You Expect?*<sup>2</sup> he reflects on how “the fall” influences marriages in particular: We married (if we are married) a broken person, right? We ourselves are shattered and broken people, right? We live in a broken world, right? So, Tripp muses, what should we expect in our marriages? We irrationally (yet wholeheartedly!) expect marriage to be endless days of smiles and romantic bliss. We would credit whoever coined this phrase if we knew the source, but the expression “expectations are premeditated resentments” is genius. If one expects a marriage (and career) full of perpetual smiles and romantic bliss and one gets the pressure of getting tenure and a colicky infant, there is a catastrophic collision of expectations. Tripp’s wisdom is very helpful: we live out our married lives (and single lives) in the context of a broken world, so we should expect unmet expectations and difficulties. Thanks be to God that we have a Savior!

The same could be said of our departments, our academic pursuits, and our professional relationships. What do we expect on this side of the fall? Expectations, acknowledged or not, can lead us toward lives of bitterness. On the other hand, if we embrace that our stories will always be lived out in a world that has pain and difficulties, it will help us flourish despite this, even as we trust God to provide strength to do what He has called us to do. The life God has given each of us, including the call to the university, is one that will be worked out in the midst of challenges and difficulties. This is why pastor and professor Zack Eswine writes, “All this is to say that the wise learn to manage life, not by frantically trying to glue together the knocked-over vase, but by gathering all of the shattered jagged pieces and powdered dust from the floor and bringing them then to God.”<sup>3</sup> In our tumultuous world, our great assurance is Jesus, the “sure and steadfast anchor of the soul” (Heb. 6:19).

This tension, or conflict, between God’s good creation and the broken state of the world is evident everywhere, not only in the relationships of academe, but in our Christian intellectual pursuits as well. In distinguished professor of philosophy Alvin Plantinga’s insightful essay “On Christian Scholarship,” he observes: “Christian thinkers going back at least to Augustine have seen human history as involving a sort of contest, or battle, or struggle between two implacably opposed spiritual forces. . . . Augustine was right; and the contemporary western intellectual world, like the world of his times, is a battleground or arena in which rages a battle for our souls.”<sup>4</sup> The “unhappy fact,” according to Plantinga, is that in this struggle, Christians often find themselves a disdained minority: “Scholarship and science are not neutral, but are deeply involved in the struggle between Christian theism, perennial naturalism and creative anti-realism. And the unhappy fact is that at present (and in our part of the world) it is the latter two that are in the ascendancy. Christian theism has perhaps made some small steps back in recent years; but it is surely the minority opinion among our colleagues in Western universities.”<sup>5</sup>

Do not be surprised by travail in your personal and academic life; the grander story assures us this will be our lot. Yet there is great provision in Christ. The hymn writer George Matheson penned these words as he sought Christ in the midst of his personal crisis: “O love that will not let me go, I rest my weary soul in thee. And I give

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thee back the life I owe, that in thine ocean depth its flow, may richer, fuller be.”<sup>6</sup> The “redemption” chapter of God’s grander story features the remarkable announcement of the good news that this savior, and this salvation, is available to all.

Why highlight the angst and struggle that, though common to all students and professors, finds poignant expression in the daily realities of a Christ-following professor? Because without embracing this reality, one might be tempted to shrink back from living for the grander story. Or one might desperately search for vain hope in idols, like a CV, that will never be able to rescue or provide life. Or one might sadly even lose all hope that there *is* a grander story. We need to embrace that difficulties of all varieties, personal and academic, characterize God’s story (for the moment). In this case, as someone said, “reality is our friend.” But an even wiser friend commented, “Yes. But it can’t be your only friend.” Thankfully, hardship is hardly the sole vestige of God’s grander story today.

The Christian academic finds daily strength and joy in knowing that his labor is not in vain.

To the perceptive observer, the first chapter of this story, “creation,” and the promise of the final chapter, “restoration,” speak as poignantly as the ramifications of the “fall.” Sure, life as we know it now *is* lived in a fallen world, yet even the ability to recognize this lack points to the reality that we were made for something better. We long to live. But we die. We were made for community. But we (and our friends) manage to make this nigh impossible. We were created for a world of justice and peace. But we awaken to the morning news. Our country, for example, faces a huge racial crisis. There is plenty of blame to go around (what would you expect in a broken world?), but surging beneath our boiling racial cauldron, fueled by centuries of injustice, is the epic reality that (for most people, anyway) we *know* it should not be this way. We don’t *want* it to be this way. We know we were made for something so much better. The echoes of creation are everywhere, oft-revealed in our deep cravings for a future that will one day be whole.

The assurance of restoration of all things appears in the scriptures as a motivation to live one’s life for God’s grander story. In the end, God triumphs. In the end, there will be wholeness, justice, and peace. In the end, there will be no more tears. So the Apostle Paul encourages the Corinthians, “Therefore, my beloved brothers, be steadfast, immovable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, knowing that in the Lord your labor is not in vain” (1 Cor. 15:58).

The Christian academic finds daily strength and joy in knowing that his labor is not in vain. Everything from the smallest unnoticed deed done for a student to the largest grant proposal or journal publication—everything—will not be in vain if it is done as “the work of the Lord.” Everything done unto the Lord is part of a grander story to restore the world.

A Christian academic finds ultimate meaning and significance in the news that God has gifted her, has called her to a specific realm of knowledge and a locale, and has specific plans to use her to be a part of His kingdom plan to bless and redeem the world. This is no byline of a story; this *is* the story. For Christ followers, the transcendence and trajectory of God’s created world is unmistakable, and the calling to research it, declare it, and contribute to it is treasured. And though this calling likely transpires through seasons of trials and tears, an academic life offered to God, and lived for God, is assured of triumph and ultimate significance due to its pivotal place in God’s grander story. God invites you, as an academic, to be part of His forever relevant, forever soul satisfying, and forever ultimately glorious plan to bring the hope of Jesus Christ to the world.

Living for the grander story changes everything; it is like watching a television drama where the protagonist you love is in danger, but you are assured he or she survives because without that protagonist, future episodes couldn’t exist. The curiosity is then about wonderful twists and turns of the story line on the way to its undeniable conclusion. What insight, encouragement, and ultimate motivation are found in God’s grander story?

I (Heather), while a PhD student in English literature at the University of Michigan, struggled to understand a grander story beyond my own narcissistic ideas of what earning that degree would mean for my story. I wanted, like everyone else around me, to make a name for myself in my field. I wanted recognition, applause, and importance. Alongside my cohort of twelve PhD candidates, I lived in anxiety, fear, desperation, and shame as I wrote more, researched endlessly, and tried to prove myself with every clever comment in our graduate seminars. Every once in a while, I would stop and say to myself, “What am I really doing? What do I really want? What is all this actually for?”

I didn’t know it at the time, but I was searching for a grander story.

As I grew as a Christian during this time, Jesus was capturing my heart with His great love and acceptance of me. I had memorized Psalm 16:8 (“I have set the Lord always before me; because he is at my right hand, I shall not be shaken.”) and Galatians 2:20 (“I have been crucified with Christ. It is no longer

I who live, but Christ who lives in me. And the life I now live in the flesh I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me”). But I struggled to see these truths take root in my life.

One lonely evening, I sat outside of my office feeling particularly discouraged and trapped. I wanted more out of life, but I didn’t know what I was really searching for. I asked a fellow candidate this question: “What do you think is the greatest thing that could ever happen to you?”

We were sitting on an old leather couch in the common area outside our offices in the English department. What would she say? What would I have said? Was she thinking about marriage and children? Was she thinking about a Nobel Prize?

She looked at me carefully and answered, “To get a research article published.”

I nodded my head in acknowledgement of her answer. Then, because I didn’t say a word and the silence was probably uncomfortable, she added, “I guess I don’t really know.” We were sad; both of us looked at our shoes, and although nobody spoke, I think we both knew we were somehow missing out on a grander story. We knew that publication in an academic journal would matter in some ways, but saying that it represented the *greatest thing* suddenly seemed ridiculous. Would publication be our only and greatest legacy?

In those years, God kindly led me to reconsider my life purpose. It took two years for me to process this. Eventually, I came to realize that God created me to know Him, follow Him, and be part of His plan to redeem and bless the world. The avenue for me doing this was teaching, research, and writing—yes, even about nineteenth-century British lyric poetry, in particular Samuel Taylor Coleridge, William Wordsworth, and Elizabeth Barrett Browning. The greatest thing that could happen to me—the grander story—was that I might abide in Jesus and participate in whatever God was doing on this earth to bring glory to Himself, including helping others come to know Him. That marvelous story meant that every day in the English department was about Jesus orchestrating divine encounters to advance kingdom purposes. Suddenly, my little kingdom of publishing and college teaching bowed to the magnificence of God’s grand design to include me, with my gifts and talents, in His redemptive plan. I still loved all my research, teaching, and courses, but now they shimmered with the glory of God’s purposes in these places. They became sacred spaces; teaching was a sacred vocation; research became an unearthing of God’s design in my topic; my courses were holy sites, a place to

appropriately search for ways God’s truth might permeate the darkest literary theory that set itself up against the knowledge of God.

One day I was driving from Ann Arbor to a little town called Saline, Michigan, for a gathering of Christian graduate students. I was excited to meet a particularly handsome new organic chemistry PhD student (who later became my husband, and now we have two daughters!). I was on a back road with snow falling when I cried out, “I have a purpose, and it’s not about me!” With that group of Christians, I learned how to share my faith, write an academic personal testimony, teach from a Christian worldview, and pose research questions that tapped into the grander story. I began to privately worship Jesus in every class because I learned that in Christ “are hidden all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge” (Col. 2:3), and I learned that Christ “is before all things, and in him all things hold together” (Col. 1:17). I began to see that God had called me to be in this great place and that He would “establish the work of my hands” (Ps. 90:17) and “accomplish all that concerns me” (Isa. 26:12, NIV). This was the grander story I wanted to be part of.

This is the grander story I want my life to tell.

## Reflecting on the Grander Story

1. Have you experienced a “Grand Canyon moment” when you realized your small place in a much larger world? If so, how did this impact you? If not, what are other experiences that remind you that the ultimate story of life is not about you?
2. Consider the world around you through the lens of the four chapters of God’s grander story. What evidences do you see that point to creation, fall, redemption, and restoration?
3. What are some particular ways an academic’s life might change as he or she begins to live for the grander story?
4. Disappointment, discouragement, and failure are part of most academic journeys. Share one particularly difficult experience you’ve had as an academic. How might a “grander story” view speak into this?
5. Right now in your academic journey, how would you say your work and life intersect with the grander story?

## Notes

1. For a succinct summary of the Bible story, told in seven chapters versus four, see Vaughn Roberts, *God's Big Picture: Tracing the Story-Line of the Bible* (Leicester, UK: InterVarsity Press, 2004). On finding your place in God's story, see D. A. Carson, *The God Who Is There: Finding Your Place in God's Story* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2010).
2. Paul Tripp, *What Did You Expect? Redeeming the Realities of Marriage* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010).
3. Zack W. Eswine, *Recovering Eden: The Gospel According to Ecclesiastes*, Gospel According to the Old Testament series (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2014), Kindle edition, locations 1507–9.
4. Alvin Plantinga, "On Christian Scholarship," in *The Challenge and Promise of a Catholic University*, ed. Theodore Hesburgh (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1994), 268.
5. *Ibid.*, 290–91.
6. George Matheson, "Oh, Love That Will Not Let Me Go."